

DELIUS SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER



NEWSLETTER  
of the  
DELIUS SOCIETY

President:

Eric Fenby, O.B.E.

Hon. Treasurer:

G. H. Parfitt.

Editor:

John White.

---

No. 40

SUMMER 1973

---

Contents

Editorial.

The new recording of "A Village Romeo and Juliet" - critical reviews.

Delius in America: The Visual Impact of "A Village  
Romeo and Juliet" in Washington, D. C.

John Coveney.

## EDITORIAL

This issue is concerned with "A Village Romeo and Juliet", all the articles being critical reviews of the new recording except the last, which is reprinted from the outside, back cover of the American Album produced by Angel records, and which, in greater detail than I have found elsewhere, deals with the special methods of production used in the Washington performances of the opera. I am very grateful to Mr. John Coveney for giving me permission to reproduce this extremely interesting article. Considerations of space prohibit any detailed comment on the reviews in this issue but I hope to be able to express some thoughts on the subject in a future 'Newsletter'.

\* \* \* \* \*

An appreciation is long overdue to Dr. Lionel Carley for his article in the January 1973 issue of "Music and Letters" (Volume LIV No.1) entitled: "Hans Haym: Delius's Prophet and Pioneer". Dr. Carley deals in considerable detail with the early performances in Germany of Delius' works and it becomes clear that Delius owed a great debt to Dr. Haym, whose unremitting toil on behalf of his friend over a long period of years is worthy of our greatest respect and gratitude. We should not forget, either, that most of these performances preceded the period during which Sir Thomas Beecham was Delius' chief champion. I advise all members that can, to obtain a copy of the January 'Music and Letters'. (Address: 44, Conduit Street, London, W.1.)

\* \* \* \* \*

Although we must never under-estimate the work done by Sir Thomas Beecham, the mistaken impression is sometimes given that he was alone in performing Delius and, indeed, that other conductors were loth to poach on what was considered to be his own preserve. That this was far from being the case is illustrated by a list of performances conducted by Sir Hamilton Harty sent to me by Mr. H. Roberts of Oxford. Mr. Roberts went through the Halle programmes (in the Watson Library) for the period of Sir Hamilton's conductorship and came up with the following impressive list:-

- 18.12.19 Violin Concerto (Sammons)  
(This was before becoming principal conductor of the Halle. He took up the position of principal conductor at the commencement of the 1920-1 season)
- 15.12.21 Brigg Fair.
- 9. 2.22 Piano Concerto (F. Dawson).
- 16.11.22 Dance Rhapsody No. 1.
- 30.10.24 Brigg Fair.
- 4.11.26 In a Summer Garden.
- 2. 2.28 Paris.
- 7. 2.29 Sea Drift.
- 28.11.29 Dance Rhapsody No.1.

- 9. 1.30 Paris.
- 6. 3.30 In a Summer Garden
- 23.10.30 Brigg Fair.
- 12. 2.31 Appalachia.
- 15.10.31 Walk to The Paradise Garden.
- 5.11.31 In a Summer Garden.
- 18. 2.32 Mass of Life (Dorothy Stanton, Astra Desmond, Trefor Jones, Roy Henderson).
- 25. 2.32 Life's Dance.
- 2. 3.33 Mass of Life (Stanton, Desmond, Francis Russel, Henderson).

I am indebted to Mr. Roberts for this interesting piece of research. As he says: "one wishes that at least one of our London conductors would display equal interest!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Choveaux wrote to inform us that on July 14th Derek Hudson would be conducting the R.F.O. in a performance of "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring": the information reached me too late for insertion in the previous Newsletter but some members may have seen the notices for the concert. Mr. Choveaux also mentioned that his wife, Andree Maillard-Back, would be singing songs by Grieg and Delius in Grieg's house at Bergen on June 24th. The songs chosen were settings of the same texts by the two composers, and the recital was the first of its kind by a non-Scandinavian singer. It must have been a delightful occasion and the idea of comparing the different settings was excellent and should be born in mind for a future Society meeting.

\* \* \* \* \*

It now becomes necessary to mention that the editorship of the "Newsletter" is passing to Mr. Christopher Redwood with effect from the next issue. It has always been my hope that the presentation and scope of the Newsletter would steadily improve, and arrangements have now been completed for a new method of reproduction which will add considerably to the appearance of each number. My best wishes go to Mr. Redwood, who has considerable experience in this type of work and who will bring a fresh approach to his task. And it is a pleasure to record my very sincere thanks to all the contributors, who have made the Newsletter into an informative, and often scholarly, publication. It has been a privilege to work with them and to be of service to the Society in this way.

Please send future contributions and correspondence to the Editor, 4, Tabor Grove, Wimbledon, London SW19 4EB.

DELIUS: A Village Romeo and Juliet.

John Alldis Choir, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Meredith Davies. HMV SLS 966(3)

CAST: Benjamin Luxon (Manz), Noel Mangin (Marti), Corin Manley (Sali, as a child), Wendy Eathorne (Vrenchen, as a child), Robert Tear (Sali), Elizabeth Harwood (Vrenchen), John Shirley-Quirk (Dark Fiddler), Stephen Varcoe (First Peasant/Shooting-gallery man), Bryn Evans (Second Peasant), Felicity Palmer (First Woman/Slim Girl), Mavis Beattie (Second Woman), Doreen Price (Gingerbread Woman), Elaine Barry (Wheel-of-fortune Woman), Pauline Stevens (Cheap-jewellery woman), Martyn Hill (Showman), John Huw Davies (Merry-go-round man), Sarah Walker (Wild Girl), Paul Taylor (Poor horn-player), Franklyn Whiteley (Hunchbacked bass-player), Robert Bateman (First Bargee), John Noble (Second Bargee), Ian Partridge (Third Bargee).

### Delius : A Village Romeo & Juliet

by Deryck Cooke.

How marvellous to have at last an LP version - and such a splendid one, both as a performance and a recording - of this shamefully neglected and under-rated opera by Delius! I know of no music more hauntingly beautiful than this, and under Meredith Davies it exerts all its unique and irresistible spell. I would advise anyone who is not absolutely and irrevocably prejudiced against Delius to get hold of this recording and consider whether A Village Romeo and Juliet is not amongst the greatest works of the whole late-romantic period.

As a totally committed Delian, I know that my admiration of the work is suspect, and so, to recommend it, I will do what the gramophone companies do to recommend their records - quote one or two enthusiastic comments on the work (from critical reviews of the Sadler's-Wells production in the Delius centenary year, 1962). "I have never been a Delian, but A Village Romeo and Juliet seems to me a work of indisputable beauty and dramatic validity" (David Cairns). "Musically, one of the big surprises of the revival is Delius's splendidly generous writing for the solo voice..... The sheer loveliness of the love-music was a foregone conclusion, save that its very personal strain of tender innocence proved moving to a degree that only innocence can" ('Our Special Correspondent' in The Times). "Strong thematic material pulses through much of the score with an effect of natural vitality" (Desmond Shawe-Taylor). "Delius enfolds his lovers in music of great tenderness" (Peter Heyworth). "The taste which the work leaves in the mind is pervasive and seductive" (John Warrack). Of course, these positive views are picked out from a mass of negative ones concerned with what the reviewers considered the work's shortcomings; but they are sufficient, I think, to show that any shortcomings there may be cannot prevent it from making a most powerful impact. In any case, as I pointed out at the time (in the last of three articles on the Delius centenary published in Musical Opinion in June, July and August 1962), the Sadler's Wells production maximised and added to

these short-comings, being a more or less continuous misrepresentation of the opera; and Meredith Davies, although he realised to the full the beauty and poignancy of the music given to the lovers, failed to do justice to the rest of the score.

This criticism does not apply to the present recording at all: since 1962, Mr. Davies has deepened his understanding of the score immeasurably, and he now offers a most moving interpretation, even if he cannot quite approach Beecham on his old HMV 78 rpm recording made in May 1948. At last, undistracted by the vagaries of a misconceived stage-production (or by the Beecham recording's antique mono sound and side-breaks every few minutes), we can sit back happily and respond with our visual imaginations to Delius's wonderful score, especially since the side-breaks correspond to the divisions of the opera itself (six scenes on five sides with the musically continuous second and third scenes accommodated on Side 2). To do so is to realise that, in this concentrated two-hour work, the occasional imperfections are as nothing compared with what gives it its peculiar greatness: its intense expression of the fragility, defencelessness and evanescence of the pure natural essence of sexual love that is born in adolescence - compounded of youthful idealism, mutual compassion, and nascent erotic desire - a shared dream, linked with the innocence of nature and at odds with the hard material values of adult civilised life, which soon erode and destroy it, life being what it is. To this should be added the exultant acceptance of death on the part of the two young lovers, in a world which can find no place for their love - something which puts the final love-duet on the very highest musical plane.

In the Beecham recording, Rene Soames was miscast as Sali (though I found that his manful efforts as a song recitalist to project his voice against Delius's Wagnerian orchestra gave an appropriate fragility to the role): Robert Tear sings the part much more powerfully, where required, without losing any of its tenderness, even if he occasionally presses on high notes to the extent of losing control of his vibrato. Beecham's Vrenchen was Lorely Dyer, and I always admired her interpretation, though many did not; Elizabeth Harwood sings the part no less beautifully, and both she and Robert Tear manage Delius's extremely difficult duet-writing (it contains a good deal of high tenor against low soprano) much more easily, and with a superb balance. One thing that did surprise me was her indifference to the note-values of Delius's solo lines at two important points. When Vrenchen refers solemnly to the remark by one of the vagabonds that she and Sali could never share their life, Delius sets the words "What that woman said is true" with the word "woman" on the first two crotchets of a slow four-four bar, and it is this that gives this moving phrase its solemnity; but Elizabeth Harwood spoils the effect by singing the word to a quaver and a dotted crotchet. And the same thing happens in Vrenchen's lovely vocal line to the words "Now I understand - this is the garden of Paradise!": here, the solemnity is achieved in the same way, by setting "now I" to the first two crotchets of a slow four-four bar, and the rapture by setting "is the" to a dotted crotchet and a quaver, but Miss Harwood again spoils the effect, this time by switching the two rhythms round. These may seem small points, but Delius's rhythmic declamation is meticulously organised to achieve the appropriate emotional effect. John Shirley-Quirk makes the Dark Fiddler a very real

figure, as he should be, and sings the part most powerfully, though he does not quite match the sheer lyrical beauty of Gordon Clinton in the Beecham recording: the bitterness of this character should surely be mingled with a certain gentleness when he sings of his oneness with nature.

Of the lovers' two fathers, farmers both, Benjamin Luxon is splendidly lyrical as Manz, while Noel Mangin makes an adequate Marti, though his voice is not always well focused. And of the two singers who represent Sali and Vrenchen as children, the boy treble Corin Manley brings off his difficult part extremely well (I'm not worried by the familiar 'off-pitch' moments that seem to afflict all boy-singers in opera), and Wendy Eathorne scales her voice down beautifully to sound like a child. All the singers, incidentally, are much helped by a new English translation which is far more natural and lifelike than the old one. The singing of the John Alldis Choir is superb throughout, especially in the magical off-stage chorus of vagabonds which opens the final scene at the Paradise Garden; and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra respond to the extremely sensitive direction of Meredith Davies with equally sensitive playing. The recording engineers have made a marvellous job of reproducing Delius's elusive textures, especially with regard to the off-stage music - the aforementioned chorus of vagabonds, the voice of Manz ploughing in the distance at the very beginning of the opera, the song of the approaching Dark Fiddler later in Scene 1, and the far-off song of the boatmen at the very end of the work. So also with the lovers' dream of their wedding in Scene 4, which is of course not off-stage, but is enveloped in a misty acoustic appropriate to the world of dreams. The one weakness of the recording is its lack of bass, but I found it possible to remedy this by turning up my bass control to halfway between normal and maximum.

It was an inspired solution of the problem of a 'fill-up' to record for posterity the voice of Eric Fenby, to whose devotion as Delius's amanuensis we owe such works by the blind and paralysed sexagenarian composer as Songs of Farewell, Idyll and the Third Violin Sonata - as well as Fenby's own illuminating and indispensable book My Life with Delius. His illustrated talk on the composer is admittedly more of a discursive recollection than a concentrated assessment, but it includes several fascinating 'footnotes' to his book, the most notable being a remarkably lifelike simulation, at the piano, of how he took down from Delius's dictation the final pages of Cynara.

(Reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of THE GRAMOPHONE)

## Village Romeo

by John McCabe.

Many composers have sought for a musical realisation of ecstasy; Scriabin, as we saw in 1972, was one of the most noted and single-minded in this respect. Nowadays, some kind of mystical ecstasy is an important part of the nature of much so-called advanced music, though one takes leave to doubt whether the emotion implied by the word is any more than an ever-diminishing circle of purely selfish introverted reflection. But to my mind the purest, and most sublimely sensuous, musical evocation of genuine ecstasy (out-side of Tristan and Parsifal, that is, and I'm not sure they might not be included, at that) occurs in the music of Delius, and especially in his great opera A Village Romeo and Juliet. It is too easy to see the popular orchestral snippet, A Walk to the Paradise Garden, as simply a remarkably pretty, ever-fresh tone-picture, vaguely associated with nature (as I'm sure the general attitude is), yet if you think about it, even when played as a separate concert item it has a sublime element of unself-conscious, deeply moving restfulness that goes deeper than mere emotional prettiness. In the context of the opera as a whole, it achieves a level of expression given only to the greatest of musical poets, and one moreover that inhabits realms of other-wordly bliss.

Delius, of course, was a composer whose poetry is most frequently expressive of just such an atmosphere, and it is hardly surprising that with so congenial a subject he produced in this opera one of his undying masterpieces. The connexion with Shakespeare is simply that the hero and heroine, Sali and Vrenchen, are the children of bitter enemies, though the enmity of their fathers is derived from desired possession of a strip of land bordering their respective farms. The result of their enmity is poverty for the children, whose love, expressed throughout the opera in music of sometimes anguished but more often superbly poised, warmly expressive humanity, leads them to their ultimate death, for only in death do they find complete peace from the cares of the world. The relatively undramatic nature of their death is seen from the first note of the opera, which sustains a movingly valedictory tone enhanced, rather than disrupted, by the moments of intense drama (such as Sali's striking Vrenchen's father) or the gaiety and brilliance of the scene at the village fair. A further aspect of the work that must have immediately brought out an echo in Delius is the strange figure of the Dark Fiddler, to whom the disputed land really belonged but which he cannot claim. Like a semi-supernatural oracle he, with Sali and Vrenchen the only other characters to do so, appears throughout the opera, not with as clearly defined a purpose as the Greek chorus but not unlike that dramatic device by the way in which his prophecies in earlier scenes, coming as they do from a figure who seems to come almost from another world, widen the scope of the opera from an intimate emotional drama to one with a more universal application. As Eric Fenby points out in his notes for this album, the "Dark Fiddler still hangs about his land, and his playing bodes no good. Our Paradise Garden is overgrown, and we too are children of strife."

Delius divided the opera into six scenes, of which the last, when the Dark Fiddler tries to persuade Sali and Vrenchen to join him and his companions in their wandering way of life but fails to do so, takes place in the Paradise Garden (the orchestral Walk leads into this final scene), a world remote and strange from the real world, a staging-post on the way to immortality for the lovers. There are few genuinely dramatic incidents in the opera, yet at no point does it exert anything less than a spell of total fascination. Like Bax and Tippett, Delius was able to conjure a world of summer warmth, sunlight and shadows, unseen magic, and this score is drenched in the most richly inventive sound. It is by no means devoid of excitement, as one might think; but Delius is often full of excitement even when his music is in total effect restful and peaceful. The orchestration, which is for huge resources, is immensely imaginative, his handling of counterpoint never more assured and intricately balanced.

The work dates from 1900-1, and has had (like most worthwhile British operas, sad to say) a chequered career. This is no place to comment on the implications of this, but one can perhaps say that it is a serious indictment of the attitude of our opera companies that works like this one and Vaughan Williams's great *The Pilgrim's Progress* are so seldom performed. In their totally different ways, these two mystical, ecstatic works are as rewarding musical experiences as any of the more obviously melodramatic operas which maintain a stranglehold on the repertoire. But you do have to accept the intensely personal nature of the vision in each case; and, moreover, you need a superlative performance. EMI has already given just such a supreme performance of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and puts us further in its debt now with an equally fine one of *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. Meredith Davies's acquaintance with the score is of long standing, for he conducted the performance at the Delius Centenary Festival in 1962 in Bradford, and his powers as a committed Delian, already evidenced on record, are further revealed by his most persuasive conducting on this set. He has the measure of the extremely elusive Delius style, with its haunting, elliptical rhythmic flow and its melodic abundance of finely-drawn lines. He also has an acute ear for internal balance, something which stands him in particularly good stead here, for it would be all too easy for the proliferating strands to add up to a muddy welter of sound in any less sympathetic and controlled interpretation.

He has the advantage, too, of an excellent cast. (One is struck by the fact that on both this and the Vaughan Williams set the singing achieves a very much higher general level than one would dare to expect from any of those starry, expensive opera sets filled with jet-set names!) Robert Tear makes a virile, warm-voiced, lyrical Sali, with Elizabeth Harwood, possibly in her best recording so far, a superbly confident, expressive Vrenchen, Benjamin Luxon and Noel Mangin, as the warring fathers, have relatively small roles, yet each etches in the character sharply and distinctively. John Shirley-Quirk makes the Dark Fiddler a most convincing character, strong, brooding yet with a touch of humanity that exactly catches this figure's ambivalent existence, half-real, half-magical. The singing of the many diminutive roles is without exception excellent, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra plays with mellifluousness, precision, and musicality throughout. John Alldis's Choir, too, sings with immense panache and subtlety. The recording is particularly fine even by EMI's operatic standards, spacious and warm, beautifully balanced.

In short, it makes a superb presentation of this haunting opera. The sixth side is taken up with a talk on Delius and his music by Eric Fenby, who as everybody knows was the composer's amanuensis during the last six years of Delius's life; this is illustrated by excerpts from various current EMI records of Delius's music. One final word: I daresay that the wise-acres will be mentioning Beecham, whose name I have purposely omitted earlier, complaining no doubt that (in effect) Davies does not conduct the work like Beecham did. That is immaterial. Just as Groves has given us a magnificent recording of *A Mass of Life* (which, incidentally, I have the audacity to prefer to Beecham's), Meredith Davies has given us an equally personal, convincing, and moving performance of this opera. Let us be content, and deeply grateful for it.

(Reprinted by kind permission of the author from *Records & Recordings*).

The New York Times, Sunday February 11th, 1973.

### Delius - A Ho-Hum Cult Figure?

by Peter G. Davis.

Frederick Delius is a strange case. Of course, like so many composers who cultivated a circumscribed, specialized style to perfection, he has his passionate partisans. But Delius has never been able to inspire that one basic ingredient necessary to foster a really controversial cult figure: an equal amount of violent dislike. No one really hates Delius - those who find his misty, late-summer afternoon chromaticism and nostalgia-drenched, bittersweet romanticism unpalatable simply shrug their shoulders and walk away. Critic Bernard Jacobson once summed up the anti-Delian attitude pretty accurately: "It is like talking for hours on end to a beautiful woman who never disagrees with a word you say."

England has always been Delius headquarters, although the composer left his native Britain in 1882 at the age of 20 for Florida, Leipzig, Paris and, finally, the French village of Grez-sur-Loing where he died in 1934. Expatriate and solitary, Delius is still very much an English persona and it is not surprising that virtually all recordings of his music originate in London - EMI (Angel in this country) has been busily taping many of the major works. The latest to arrive is *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, his most noteworthy opera and a piece that seems to sum up the quintessential qualities that make Delius so beloved in some quarters and so ho-hummed in others (Angel SBXL 3784, two disks).

The story of the opera is simplicity itself: two beautiful young people (Sali and Vrenchen) fall in love and are kept apart by their feuding fathers; unable to nurture their love within the crass realities of everyday life, the two commit suicide. The Gottfried Keller novella on which Delius based his text (written in German) is a meticulously detailed piece of romantic realism taken from an actual occurrence. For his purposes, Delius pruned away all but the most essential action, playing up the symbolic elements (the mysterious Dark Fiddler, the ruined "Paradise Garden" Inn, natural forces that influence human actions) to make his point: deliberate rejection of a world where idealized love cannot exist.

We have seen this before, of course, in "Tristan" and "Pelleas," but it is one measure of Wagner's and Debussy's genius that those works would scarcely leave one asking impatiently: "What's wrong with those two?" With Delius it's a bit difficult to avoid the question, partly because Keller's Swiss Village setting still retains enough of a time-and-place flavor to give the libretto a certain face-value aspect. That problem is neatly avoided in the closed yet ambiguously mythic environment of "Tristan" or "Pelleas" where beauty seems hopelessly hemmed in and inevitably doomed.

Then too, Delius's musical idiom, for all its lush textural hues and warm melodies, lacks that final persuasive eloquence to force total acceptance of its special vision. This is, to some extent, a matter of taste, but until the final scenes - the idyll in the Paradise Garden and the lovers' boat ride to a watery grave (both characteristically more orchestral in conception than vocal) - the music only fitfully fulfills even its own requirements: the boisterous "real life" scenes of the fair and the vagabonds are blunted and dull, while Sali and Vrenchen themselves exist only as vague concepts exploited in a couple of love duets that begin well, only to evaporate in a vapid cloud of shifting seventh and ninth chords.

If "A Village Romeo and Juliet" fails the masterpiece test, the opera can be enjoyed on a lesser scale, principally as an evocation of a mood of wistful melancholy, a regret for passing beauty. It may have been an essentially adolescent quality of Delius's musical makeup that led him to harp on this strain in piece after piece, but there is no reason why we can't savor it from time to time - especially in moments like "The Walk to the Paradise Garden" where the composer pulls it off so well. Also Delius's refined sensibility for musical nature-scapes - the billowing cornfield in the first scene, the French pastorate introduction to the third, the flowing river that carries the lovers to their deaths - does succeed in conjuring up a very special world that weaves a hypnotic spell all its own.

Angel's recording is not the first - as with so many Delius works, Sir Thomas Beecham got there first, although his 1948 version has never been dubbed on LP. Meredith Davies leads the present performance and the evenly paced forward flow, breadth of phrasing and carefully balanced sonority he achieves with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is altogether admirable. Davies misses out only in capturing the under-stated eroticism that suffuses Delius's entire musical personality - an ingredient that even Beecham never fully brought to the surface. Perhaps we will have to wait for a non-English conductor to tap this Delian facet.

The singers are serviceable on the whole, with Elizabeth Harwood excelling as a vulnerable, sweet-voiced Vrenchen. Robert Tear is a typically dry English tenor in the Peter Fears tradition, and his Sali, quite frankly, sounds all too prim and proper - musically sensitive, to be sure, but not especially ingratiating on the ear. John Shirley-Quirk, in the only other solo role of importance as the Dark Fiddler, is his dependable self, although I can imagine more being made of the words.

In England the opera was spread over five sides (a spoken reminiscence by Delius's amanuensis, Eric Fenby, occupies the sixth) as opposed to Angel's rather cramped, bass deficient four-sided version. The pock-marked pressing of my copy, though, is harder to forgive; since a decently pressed classical record seems a virtual technical impossibility in this country, perhaps Angel should follow Philips's and DG's example by importing directly from Europe.

Cue, March 3, 1973.

### A Village Romeo and Juliet

by Greer Johnson.

"Rhapsodic, exquisite, sublime" - these three words, no doubt, have been irreversibly cheapened and shopworn by the merchants of mendacity. And one man's idea of beauty is another's of banality. With this in mind, I turn to three albums which feature works I find rhapsodic, exquisite, sublime, and very beautiful. The rarest of these is a first stereo recording of Delius' opera "A Village Romeo and Juliet" (Angel - 2 discs). The principal singers of a persuasive performance are Elizabeth Harwood, Robert Tear, John Shirley-Quirk, Benjamin Luxon, and Noel Mangin; Meredith Davies, who is becoming something of a Delius specialist, leads the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Many concert-goers know "The Walk to the Paradise Gardens", the orchestral centerpiece of the opera, which serves the work much as the "Sea Interludes" serve Britten's "Peter Grimes". Too few until now can have had the opportunity to savor the evanescent loveliness of a dreamstruck score. The libretto is drawn from a tale of Gottfried Keller, not from Shakespeare, and its muted but erotic progression is symbolic, subtle, and almost meditative - like interior monologues by two lost souls. An excellent album essay by Angel's John Coveney recapitulates the story of the success this neglected masterpiece had on the occasion of its belated American premiere with the Washington Opera Society in 1972. Mr. Coveney also assures us that this visually revolutionary Frank Corsaro production will be reproduced by New York City Opera next fall. Meanwhile, at home, we are not in want. (The review continues by dealing with issues of records by Karatan and the Berlin Philharmonic and Munchinger with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra - Editor).

Country Life - March 29, 1973.

### Delius Then and Now

by Stewart Dees.

The inimitable and unforgettable Sir Thomas Beecham, writing about the first performance in London of Delius's A Village Romeo and Juliet which he conducted, said: "During the last act the curtain is down for about eight minutes, and there is heard a strain of haunting beauty; an intermezzo now known to every concert-goer as "The Walk to the Paradise Garden". But in the theatre it went for next to nothing, being almost completely drowned by the combining sounds of British workmen battering on the stage and the loud conversation of the audience". That was at Covent Garden in 1910.

Our manners may have improved, and our stage technique become more expert, but it has not been the result of repeated performances of this opera, for, apart from the revival by Beecham in 1920, and one further production at the Royal College of Music in 1934, also conducted by Beecham, the only other production seems to have been that of the Delius Centenary Festival in Bradford in 1962.

The work had been given its original first performance in Berlin in 1907. A report by the Musical Times of that year ventures no criticism but says simply: "Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe, an opera by Fritz Delius, was produced here at the Komische Oper on February 21. The libretto is based on Gottfried Keller's well-known short story of the same title. The principal roles were taken by Herr Willi Merkel and Frä. Lola Artot de Padilla. The orchestra was under the direction of Herr Fritz Cassirer". This was the conductor who, three years earlier, had directed Delius's Koanga for the first time at Elberfeld. Delius's reputation, like his baptismal name, was at that time very much a German one.

As Beecham noted, the only part of the opera that had become really familiar by 1944 was "The Walk to the Paradise Garden", and that remains true to the present day. But those who want to hear it to some extent in its true setting can now do so easily by listening to a new recording made by EMI under the auspices of the Delius Trust (HMV SLS 966). Beecham spoke of "the last act", but in reality there are no acts as such, the opera being described simply as a "Lyric drama in six pictures" which the libretto issued with the records turns, perhaps justifiably, into "opera in six scenes". "The Walk to the Paradise Garden", which Eric Fenby in a programme note calls "the musical kernel of the opera", is beautifully played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Meredith Davies (the conductor of the Bradford revival) and those who listen to it here will realise, if they had not done so before, that it has acquired an aura somewhat more exalted (perhaps owing to a misunderstanding of its title) than its context warrants; for "The Paradise Garden" is the name of what is little more than a low "pub" to which the doomed lovers walk as a refuge from other surroundings for which they feel themselves to be too poor and shabbily dressed.

The original short story by the Swiss author, Gottfried Keller, on which the opera is based, was made into a libretto in German by Delius's wife who also first translated it into English, and Delius himself, Fenby tells us, set it to music "often concurrently in English and German". No doubt some Delius or Keller expert has already noticed the fact, but I had not realised until, for the purposes of this review, I read the original Keller story in all its engaging simplicity, that the Deliuses, although following the main lines of the narrative, slightly altered the end and, to my mind, gave it rather a prosaic turn. For, in the original, there is no sinking of the craft with the lovers on board as a result of "withdrawing the plug from the bottom of the boat". The ship (for it is "ein grosses Schiff", heavily loaded with hay) floats on through calm and torrent, and is finally found intact by a bridge, the two entwined bodies having allowed themselves to slide noiselessly to death "beneath the watery floor".

An excellent cast has been assembled for this recording, headed by Robert Tear as Sali (quasi Romeo) and Elizabeth Harwood (quasi Juliet). Word and tone are clear and delightful to listen to. Their parts as children in the first "picture" of the work are taken by Corin Manley and Wendy Eathorne with the right child-like quality of voice, and in the same scene Manz (Benjamin Luxon) and Marti (Noel Mangin) converse and quarrel effectively in their parts of village equivalents of the Montagues and Capulets. John Shirley-Quirk gives a slightly sinister turn to his interpretation of The Dark Fiddler, contrary to the view of Philip Heseltine, who wrote: "The Fiddler is a compassionate rather than a sinister figure, as some have imagined him to be". Heseltine's reasons are too long to go into here, but his account of this opera, in his book on Delius, is by far the best I have come across, and I commend it to any about to listen to these fascinating records.

Daily Telegraph. 2nd April, 1973

Opera of the mind

by Anthony Payne.

Two operas have been issued which promise to number among the most exciting records of the year, Berlioz's "Benvenuto Cellini" and Delius's "A Village Romeo and Juliet." The Delius (EMI SLS 966) poses acute problems in the theatre. It is an opera of the mind, occupying a static dream world difficult to realise with sensitivity in concrete terms. But as such, it makes excellent gramophone material. One closes one's eyes and Delius's intensely immediate and evocative expression creates its own scenic theatre, a land-scape of teeming natural beauty in which adolescent purity of emotion leads to tragic self-destruction.

Those who learned this opera from Beecham's old 78s will surely not be disappointed by this lovely new version. Meredith Davies, backed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's fine playing, gauges the music's ebb and flow excellently, and Elizabeth Harwood and Robert Tear are intelligently cast as the lovers. Both possess a youthful freshness, and if Delius's occasional but rather cruel demands for Wagnerian power from the same voices is not met, this is a minor flaw. John Shirley Quirk is an impressive Dark Fiddler, and Wendy Eathorne and the treble Corin Manley convince as the children. The voices are sometimes a little backward in perspective, but otherwise the recorded sound is warm and clear.

New Statesman 8th June, 1973.

A Dream of Eden

by Wilfrid Mellers.

Born in the heart of the industrial north, Delius rejected it with every fibre of his ardently sensitive being. Like his hero Nietzsche, he sang of the ego alone in a hostile world; and believed that, since personal feeling

is the only absolute, the forms of music must be empirical. Of course he could affect to despise traditions - religious, social or artistic - only because he had assimilated Europe's past (especially Wagner, the supreme romantic egoist) un- or half-consciously. Nonetheless, his belief in 'self-reliance' put a strain on the faculty usually called inspiration; creation is hard going if one cannot occasionally fall back on public platitude or current convention. This may be why Delius took a long time artistically to find himself, making several abortive attempts at verismo-style opera, for instance, before he discovered his essential operatic theme.

What he found, at the turn of the century, in Gottfried Keller's *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, was an appendix to *Tristan und Isolde*. The legend is essentially the same, since both operas deal with the impossibility, given the conditions of the temporal world, of achieving identity between body and spirit. The difference is that Keller's and Delius's lovers are young; we first meet them as children, and they remain childlike, at the dawn of consciousness, when they grow into sexuality. What destroys them is their parents' sordid squabble over land and property; love and material possessions cannot mix. But their answer to this is not to try to grow up, but rather to wish they were children again, anterior to the 'pain of consciousness'. There is a precise technical manifestation of this in the opera, as in all Delius's characteristic music, which is that although the generative impulse behind the music consists of Wagnerian appoggiaturas - sighs of the overburdened heart - that flow into a flux of chromatic harmonies, all the lines that comprise these harmonies sing, and are in contour vocal, modal, above all pentatonic. The harmonic chromaticism of *Experience* seeks to dissolve into a melodically pentatonic *Innocence*, so that whereas *Tristan* is about *Paradise Regained*, *A Village Romeo* longs for a lost Eden. This may explain the ambiguous effect of the Dark Stranger, real lord and father of the Wild Lands that greedy men would seek to dominate. He leads the lovers into the Paradise Gardens, and into the company of gypsies who are oblivious of social convention and directly in rapport with Nature. The wordless choral music sung in these water gardens is miraculously beautiful, inducing a pantheistic merging of ego-dominated passion into Nature, as does the wordless chorus in *The Song of the High Hills*. But the young lovers surrender to the experience, rather than triumph through it; they do not transcend, in making their own, the turmoil of passion which the Stranger presumably represents. Because the Eden of their childhood cannot be recovered, they make a voluntary act of relinquishment, allowing the unconscious waters to envelop them.

The problem in performing Delius - as Beecham supremely and perhaps uniquely understood - is to attain the typically vernal melodic bloom without discounting the harmonic intensity. As Delius himself said, 'the sense of flow is the only thing that matters'; not even Wagner's textures are more surgingly continuous and when, in this opera, we finally reach the nostalgic consummation of the orchestral interlude in the Paradise Gardens we must sense how inevitably its tenderly lifting yet almost-breaking pentatonic lyricism has evolved from the prologic scene in the lovers' childhood. For this reason the opera - though it's remarkably and perhaps

surprisingly effective in the theatre - is good to listen to at a stretch, on disc: especially in a performance such as this, given by a superb team of soloists, with the John Alldis Choir and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Meredith Davies. Delius may be a valedictory composer, but the poignancy of his farewell is inseparable from the exuberant vitality of the life he celebrated, and as sung by Elizabeth Harwood and Robert Tear the love music fuses adolescent fervour with near-Wagnerian sensuality, whilst the impetuosity of the quarrels acquires, in the performance of Benjamin Luxon and Noel Mangin, a savagery that disturbs because we recognise in it our own experience of benighted human rapacity. Still more impressively, John Shirley Quirk makes the Dark Stranger at once magical and minatory, and that, after all, is what this deeply moving opera is about. The darkly irrational forces within us are a threat; but they are also 'reality' in a sense that material possessions and will-dominated policy are not. Since Shirley Quirk's singing convinces us of this we can also believe that the passionately vulnerable lovers, spellbound by his voice and fiddle, would prefer the ec-stasis of death to a reality that is makeshift and, in the last resort, make-believe. The orchestral sonority is sumptuously recorded, with the bird-calls of the woodwind acquiring an almost-human, Edenically child-like expressivity; and if Davies is not such a 'natural' as a Delian as Sir Charles Groves (not to mention Beecham), he shapes the continuously flowing score purposefully, so that Delius's inspiration seems - as for the most part it is - at white heat.

On the sixth side Eric Fenby talks, simply and beautifully, about Delius. The reconstructed example of Delius's dictation to his amanuensis is particularly illuminating.

Delius in America

The Visual Impact of "A Village Romeo and Juliet" in  
Washington, D.C.

by John Coveney.

"Poetry without rhetoric; sound without uproar; reticence instead of exaggeration" is the way Sir Thomas Beecham described the music of Frederick Delius' "A Village Romeo and Juliet" in his biography of the composer. Sir Hugh Allen, principal of the Royal College of Music in 1934 said, "This is the most heartbreaking music in the world".

Most Delians agree that this work, composed in 1900-01, and "A Mass of Life" share honors as Delius' ultimate masterpieces. It had its world premiere at the Berlin Komische Oper on February 21, 1907 under the direction of Fritz Cassirer but has had few staged presentations since. The London premiere took place at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on February 23, 1910, under Beecham, followed by a revival ten years later in March 1920. Another production was presented in Wiesbaden, October 1927, and in 1934 the students of London's Royal College of Music impressed their audiences with a performance of scrupulous preparation, intimacy, and delicate beauty.

During March 1962 in Bradford, Delius' birthplace in Yorkshire, there was a week's musical celebration on the centenary of his birth. It included a new staged production of the work under Meredith Davies, which was subsequently also presented in London as part of the fall repertory of Sadler's Wells.

However, one feels quite secure in asserting that none of these productions realized the special, sustained atmosphere evoked by the score as successfully as did the one presented by the Washington Opera Society at the American premiere (71 years after its composition!) on April 26th, 1972 and repeated on the 28th and 30th. It was the final presentation of the Society's first season in its new home, the handsome red, white and gold, ideally proportioned 2,166-seat opera house in Kennedy Center, and was the combined inspiration of seven people: Hobart Spalding, President of the Society, Frank Corsaro, the famous opera director, Ronald Chase, the San Francisco artist and sculptor, Skip Palmer, Director of the Stage Techniques Corporation of New York, Nannette Porcher, resident Lighting Director of the American Ballet Theater, Theoni V. Aldredge, the New York costume designer, and Paul Callaway, Organist and Choirmaster of the Washington Cathedral, and conductor of those performances.

What we were treated to was something that could be paradoxically described as beautiful in an unearthly sort of way but at the same time totally real. The spell of the Delius music was heightened to an extraordinary degree by the warm, glowing colors in the changing imagery of the projections used in this multimedia system developed and perfected by Palmer and his associates. Gone were the canvas trees, one-dimensional forests, painted skies, flat vistas, tons of lumber and hardware. In their place we were shown a production that could be transported altogether in a space about one five hundredth of that needed for conventional productions. Practically all of the attendant paraphernalia above and below the stage was eliminated. All the projections were simply pictures of actual landscapes or components of them. At no time were any geometric or free-form designs or symbols superimposed for didactic purpose, and at all times the combination of scenic elements was such that an enveloping effect, every bit as three-dimensional and natural as the appearance of the singers themselves, was accomplished.

In essence, the production consisted of 402 color slides and 4,000 feet of 16mm motion picture film, four projectors for the latter, and sixteen for the former. Approximately fifty percent of the evening was involved with effects created by slides, and the remaining half by motion film or by a combination of the slides and motion film. Stage props were at an irreducible minimum.

Two stationery scrims were used. One just inside the proscenium, measured 44 x 22 feet and one somewhat smaller in the rear of the stage, approximately 40 x 20 feet. Between these was a performing space 34 feet deep. This space was occasionally intersected by a third, intermediate scrim to create the illusion of greater depth and density (e.g. the

opening scene, a copse bordering the rival farmers' fields, when the stage appeared to be thick with trees and underbrush). Four slide projectors with powerful Xenon lamps were positioned in front of the house, along with one 16mm motion picture projector. Eight slide and four 16mm projectors were positioned behind the rear scrim, all with wide angle lenses because of their closeness to it. Except for the fair scene, only one of the rear 16mm projectors was used. For the middle scrim four slide projectors were positioned in front of it and overhead (since it was impossible to place them any lower without disturbing the audience's view). They, too, were equipped with wide-angle lenses focusing downwards and producing images of spreading triangular outline.

All sixteen slide projectors were connected in pairs to a master console. Every slide change was pre-programmed on tape so that while Palmer and his operating crew of four followed the score, each pre-determined combination of slides and projectors could be activated instantly on exact musical cue by the mere pressing of just one button. The 16mm projectors were operated manually. Pictures might be shown anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, and one scrim might retain its projections while the others went through several changes. At all times, however, two projections had to be made side by side to insure the proper breadth for the 42-foot wide image required to cover the front scrim completely. Because of the drastically shorter distance from the rear projectors to the rear scrim, four slides had to be shown simultaneously through their wide-angle lenses. The contiguous edges of the separate images were purposely somewhat blurred to effect a seamless appearance. With the succession of each pair of images (on the front and intermediate scrims) or quartet of images (on the rear) the previous ones in the same space faded out at the same time as the new ones faded in.

Each still projector had a carousel tray with slides ready to fall into place, and the lamps were regulated by an automatic control for the dissolving out-and-in effect. This meant that at the initial moments of change we saw, without actually realizing, sets of double images superimposed on one another. Singers wandered among lush beauties of nature, subtly complimented by Miss Porcher's lighting which never "bounced" off the floor or any other place to mar what was projected on the scrims. To protect the front scrim from any intrusion of light reflected from the musician's stands, a black scrim was stretched taut over the orchestra pit with only a small semi-circular cutout for Mr. Callaway so that he could be seen by the singers as well as his players. The material was woven in such a way that although sound could easily pass through, light could not. The complete obscuration of the orchestra in the Bayreuth manner left us totally absorbed in the music and stage.

In the initial planning a year before the premiere, Corsaro voted the pictures for the slides and films be shot in the Appalachian Country of the U.S.A. Chase objected on the grounds that the scenery did not evoke the particular quality found in the music. So, he set off for Switzerland, the original locale of the 1856 Gottfried Keller novel from which Delius derived his libretto. He found the landscapes "too specific" but finally discovered

just the right impreciseness he believes Delius had in mind in the Moselle Valley of Germany. He felt the mixture of German and French cultural elements conveyed a general "European" vagueness which he imagined Delius wanted, and proceeded to take several thousand pictures over a two-month period.

Those showing man-made aspects of the scenery, barns, haystacks, houses, etc., were made in five different small towns in the region. In each case, the avoidance of nearby contemporary structures, TV aerials, telephone wires, road signs, etc., was a paramount consideration. By extreme good fortune, a festival was in progress in one of the towns, centered around an old-fashioned country fair complete with garlands, dancers, and pedlars of all sorts of wares. We saw all of these elements brilliantly fused in the penultimate scene of the opera.

The musical interlude joining the fair to the final scene of the opera, The Paradise Garden, is one of the world's most beautiful andantes and was written for the world premiere to enable the stage hands to make the required changes properly. This ten-minute interlude is the most well known passage from the score and is performed in symphony programs under the title, "The Walk to the Paradise Garden". In opera performances it is intended to be played with a darkened stage and lowered curtain, but in Washington we saw the walk to the Paradise Garden. As the lovers, John Stewart and Patricia Wells, looking their parts with an uncanny perfection, left the fair the stage darkened and for the next eight minutes we saw them as shadowy figures walking through a sylvan landscape of trees, flowers, streams, and wooded paths. Sometimes they would be lost to view and sometimes we saw them embrace, always surrounded with nature's magnificence. During the last two minutes of the interlude, the stage brightened again, and the real singers themselves were revealed approaching the Paradise Garden, the final scene of the tragic opera. This "Walk" was photographed in the parklands of Marin County, in northern California, and the filmed Sali and Vreli were, of course, models in the same Aldredge costumes worn by the singers.

The very last effect in the presentation was perhaps the most memorable, and the most moving. After Sali and Vreli left the Dark Fiddler (John Reardon) and his revellers, they went to the little hay barge moored to the river landing. They lay down on the straw and the stage darkened while we saw them drift downstream. The stage darkened more and through the alchemy of the Porcher lighting and the Palmer projections we believed we saw the barge actually sink, and finally there was nothing. This last, consummative moment was accomplished without benefit of sliding floors, trap doors, elevators or the like.

One left thinking how enhanced performances of "Pelleas" and the "Ring", for example, would be if presented with this technique, and how many converts would be won to opera with the improvement of its least likely-to-be-believed aspect, the visual. Although particularly adaptable to stories requiring out-door action, it could also benefit many of opera's more grandiose interiors such as Baronial halls, enormous council chambers, churches, cathedrals, throne rooms, heaven itself, and hell. "Mefistofele"

begs for it, "Boris" would be a joy, and the second act of "Aida" would really be a triumph.

But so far, only Washington, D. C. and Seattle have seen what can be accomplished by this most radical and revolutionary approach. A year previous to "A Village Romeo", the Society gave a similarly brilliant production of Delius' "Koanga" but unfortunately before its occupancy of Kennedy Center with its technically superior resources and elegant ambience. (It is hoped an early revival is planned.) Ginastera's "Beatriz Cenci" which inaugurated the house was also presented in the same manner. In prior years, Britten's "Turn of the Screw" was the first opera staged by the Society with this technique and was somewhat experimental compared to the Delius and Ginastera productions. The Seattle venture involved the first staged performance of the rock opera, "Tommy". Although as this is written only 6,500 people have experienced the intense pleasure of this "Village Romeo" at three sold-out presentations, the future is bright for many more opera goers. In the fall of '73 Julius Rudel will present the same production by his New York City Opera Company, and within two years San Diego, Seattle, and Saint Paul will also have the pleasure.

Reprinted by permission of Angel Records, U.S.A.

